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## NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

BY W. D. HOWELLS AND ALVAN F. SANBORN.

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### THE POETRY OF MR. MADISON CAWEIN\*

WHEN a poet begins writing, and we begin liking his work, we own willingly enough that we have not, and cannot have, got the compass of his talent. We must wait till he has written more, and we have learned to like him more, and even then we should hesitate his definition, from all that he has done, if we did not very commonly qualify ourselves from the latest thing he had done. Between the earliest thing and the latest thing there may have been a hundred different things, and in his swan-long life of a singer there would probably be a hundred yet, and all different. But we take the latest as if it summed him up in motive and range and tendency. Many parts of his work offer themselves in confirmation of our judgment, while those which might impeach it shrink away and hide themselves, and leave us to our precipitation, our catastrophe.

It was surely nothing less than by a catastrophe that I should have been so betrayed in the volumes of Mr. Cawein's verse which reached me last before the volume of his collected poems, now at hand in the comely form which a Western house has honored itself in giving the beautiful work of the Western poet. I had read his poetry and loved it from the beginning, and in each successive expression of it, I had delighted in its expanding and maturing beauty. I believe I had not failed to own its compass, and when—

“He touched the tender stops of various quills,”

I had responded to every note of the changing music. I did

\* “The Poems of Madison Cawein.” With seventeen photogravures from oil-paintings by Eric Pape. Printed by The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Indianapolis, for Ben La Bree, Jr., Louisville, Kentucky. Sold by Subscription. In five volumes, limited to 250 sets. 1907.

not always respond audibly either in public or in private, for it seemed to me that so old a friend might fairly rest on the laurels he had helped bestow. But when that last volume came, I said to myself, "This applausive silence has gone on long enough. It is time to break it with open appreciation. Still," I said, "I must guard against too great appreciation; I must mix in a little depreciation, to show that I have read attentively, critically, authoritatively." So I applied myself to the cheapest and easiest means of depreciation, and asked, "Why do you always write Nature poems? Why not Human Nature poems?" or the like. But in seizing upon an objection so obvious that I ought to have known it was superficial, I had wronged a poet, who had never done me harm, but only good, in the very terms and conditions of his being a poet. I had not stayed to see that his nature poetry was instinct with human poetry, with his human poetry, with mine, with yours. I had made his reproach what ought to have been his finest praise, what is always the praise of poetry when it is not artificial and formal. I ought to have said, as I had seen, that not one of his lovely landscapes in which I could discover no human figure, but thrilled with a human presence penetrating to it from his most sensitive and subtle spirit until it was all but painfully alive with memories, with regrets, with longings, with hopes, with all that from time to time mutably constitutes us men and women, and yet keeps us children. He has the gift, in a measure that I do not think surpassed in any poet, of touching some smallest or commonest thing in nature, and making it live from the manifold associations in which we have our being, and glow thereafter with an inextinguishable beauty. His felicities do not seem sought; rather they seem to seek him, and to surprise him with the delight they impart through him. He has the inspiration of the right word, and the courage of it, so that though in the first instant you may be challenged, you may be revolted, by something that you might have thought uncouth, you are presently overcome by the happy bravery of it, and gladly recognize that no other word of those verbal saints or aristocrats, dedicated to the worship or service of beauty, would at all so well have conveyed the sense of it as this or that plebeian.

If I began indulging myself in the pleasure of quotation, or the delight of giving proofs of what I say, I should soon and

far transcend the modest bounds which the editor has set my paper. But the reader may take it from me that no other poet, not even of the great Elizabethan range, can outword this poet when it comes to choosing some epithet fresh from the earth or air, and with the morning sun or light upon it, for an emotion or experience in which the race renews its youth from generation to generation. He is of the kind of Keats and Shelley and Wordsworth and Coleridge, in that truth to observance and experience of nature and the joyous expression of it, which are the dominant characteristics of his art. It is imaginable that the thinness of the social world in the Middle West threw the poet upon the communion with the fields and woods, the days and nights, the changing seasons, in which another great nature poet of ours declares they "speak in various language." But nothing could be farther from the didactic mood in which "communion with the various forms" of nature casts the Puritanic soul of Bryant, than the mood in which this German-blooded, Kentucky-born poet, who keeps throughout his song the sense of a perpetual and inalienable youth, with a spirit as pagan as that which breathes from Greek sculpture—but happily not more pagan. Most modern poets who are antique are rather over-Hellenic, in their wish not to be English or French, but there is nothing voluntary in Mr. Cawein's naturalization in the older world of myth and fable; he is too sincerely and solely a poet to be a *poseur*; he has his eyes everywhere except on the spectator, and his affair is to report the beauty that he sees, as if there were no one by to hear.

An interesting and charming trait of his poetry is its constant theme of youth and its limit within the range that the emotions and aspirations of youth take. He might indeed be called the poet of youth if he resented being called the poet of nature; but the poet of youth, be it understood, of vague regrets, of "tears, idle tears," of "long, long thoughts," for that is the real youth, and not of the youth of the supposed hilarity, the attributive recklessness, the daring hopes. Perhaps there is some such youth as this, but it has not its home in the breast of any young poet, and he rarely utters it; at best he is of a light melancholy, a smiling wistfulness, and upon the whole October is more to his mind than May.

In Mr. Cawein's work, therefore, what is not the expression

of the world we vainly and rashly call the inanimate world, is the hardly more dramatized, and not more enchantingly imagined story of lovers, rather unhappy lovers. He finds his own in this sort far and near; in classic Greece, in heroic England, in romantic Germany, where the blue-flower blows, but not less in beautiful and familiar Kentucky, where the blue-grass shows itself equally the emblem of poetry, and the mouldering log in the cabin wall or the woodland path is of the same poetic value as the marble of the ruined temple or the stone of the crumbling castle. His singularly creative fancy breathes a soul into every scene; his touch leaves everything that was dull to the sense before glowing in the light of joyful recognition. He classifies his poems by different names, and they are of different themes, but they are after all of that unity which I have been trying, all too shirkingly, to suggest. One, for instance, of the longest in the volume of "*New World Idylls and Poems of Love*" is the pathetic story which tells itself in the lyrical eclogue, "*One Day and Another.*" It is the conversation, prolonged from meeting to meeting between two lovers whom death parts; but who recurrently find themselves and each other in the gardens and the woods, and on the waters which they tell each other of and together delight in. The effect is that which is truest to youth and love, for these transmutations of emotion form the disguise of self which makes passion tolerable; but mechanically the result is a series of nature-poems. More genuinely dramatic are such pieces as "*The Feud*," "*Ku-klux*," and "*The Lynchers*," three out of many; but one which I value more because it is worthy of Wordsworth, or of Tennyson in a Wordsworthian mood, is "*The Old Mill*," where, with all the wonted charm of his landscape art, Mr. Cawein gives us a strongly local and novel piece of character painting.

I deny myself with increasing reluctance the pleasure of quoting the stanzas, the verses, the phrases, the epithets which lure me by scores and hundreds in his poems. It must suffice me to say that I do not know any poem of his which has not some such a felicity; I do not know any poem of his which is not worth reading, at least the first time, and often the second and the third time, and so on as often as you have the chance of recurring to it. Some disappoint and others delight more than others; but there is none but in greater or less measure has the witchery native to the poet, and his place and his period.

It is only in order of his later time that I would put Mr. Cawein first among those Mid-Western poets, of whom he is the youngest. Poetry in the Middle West has had its development in which it was eclipsed by the splendor, transitory if not vain, of the California school. But it is deeply rooted in the life of the region, and is as true to its origins as any faithful portraiture of the Mid-Western landscape could be; you could not mistake the source of the poem or the picture. In a certain tenderness of light and coloring, the poems would recall the mellowed masterpieces of the older literatures rather than those of the New England school, where conscience dwells almost rebukingly with beauty. Perhaps if I name Mr. Cowein with Mr. James Whitcomb Riley, and with both those poets as true and fine, Mr. J. J. Piatt and Mrs. S. M. B. Piatt, I shall be making my meaning clearer. No doubt, there are others who will not at the moment name themselves to me, but keep themselves for the reader's less hurried recollection, and with whom he will like to group these. If the Middle West had produced no poets but these, she would have uttered herself in poetry in a voice not mistakable for any other. Each of them is an artist, and with their native quality in common, each has a peculiar charm. It is enough to say that Mr. Cawein's poetry has a beauty which is enchantingly its own, and with a family favor recognizable in the work of the others, is otherwise akin to that only as it is akin to what is beautiful in all poetry.

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W. D. HOWELLS.

RENE BAZIN'S NEW NOVEL.\*

“‘Ah! there you are, father! I am not late?’

“‘Prompt as a soldier, my friend, like myself: I have only just come.’

“General Philippe de Meximieu was standing on a convex, pebbled strip between green slopes, awaiting the arrival of Michel. . . . He allowed his son to approach without making a movement towards him: he was preoccupied; his back was turned to his château, and he was looking fixedly, with an air of distrust and surprise, towards the Southwest, into the arch formed by the leafless oaks over the forest road.

“‘Did you hear that?’ he demanded.

“‘What?’

“‘What they are singing. Listen, they are coming this way.’

“The force of the wind and the accidents of the ground had prevented Michel from hearing before. In the woods to the left, powerful, ardent, musical voices were singing the ‘*Internationale*.’\* Most of the words

\* “*Le Blé Qui Lève*.” By René Bazin. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.